OLD PATHS

By L.S.Dell

You join me now, in a graveyard. Not my natural habitat, but I'm feeling like a big brave boy today.

Why am I here?

For the photography project, obviously, I don't just lurk in these places like a dejected goth.

It's because this graveyard, is not your normal local village church graveyard, your nan isn't lying in this one. I'm surrounded by tombs, by crypts of Colchester's old rich Catholics – tombs which lie in the middle of the historical ruins of St. Botolph's Priory.

This Priory was built at the beginning of the 12th Century, one of the first Augustinian priories in England. Now, it's been abandoned for some 400 years, after it was shot to bits during the English Civil War. Today, this consecrated ground is host to something much more blasphemous.

It's 3pm on a Tuesday, and there are quite a few people in the ruins, sitting on tombs. Theres a big drunk bloke, with a beautiful dog, a Boxer, and a couple of drunkard crackhead-looking men and women. You could solve the energy crisis by wringing out the oil from their greasy hair. They're blaring music, smoking, couple of cans, shouting and swearing at passers-by.

The vast majority of the Essex people, like these lot here, aren't especially bothered about the local history, or the ruins and castles. They don't have much reverence or respect for these kinds of places. They're normal, not really considered a big deal.

And yet, these rocks tell us a story. A story of a time when Essex was important, when it was a place of extreme violence, rebellion, and industry.

Don't worry, I'll make it snappy.

Before it was Essex, this land was a rural coastal region home to the Celtic Trinovantes tribe, centred around *Camulodunon* - today's Colchester, the most populous city in Essex. The Celts mostly lived in cooperation, with the odd small war here and there to spice things up. When the Romans arrived in AD 43, they made Camulodunon the capital of Britain, building a great temple to Emperor Claudius.

But many of the Celts weren't exactly chuffed about all this. One of them, was a young woman, widow of an Iceni King. When her husband died, the Romans stole his land, and she and her daughters were flogged and raped. Out of her fury, was born a rebellion against the Romans never before seen, and one that would make her a national hero to this day, named "Victory" in Celtic, or as we would know her – Boudica. Leading a force of 120,000 Iceni and Trinovantes warriors, Boudica burnt Colchester and its temple to the ground, killing all Romans they found. In fact, her attack was so vicious, you can still find a clear layer of blackened earth some 2 or 3 metres underneath Colchester – called the Boudica Destruction Horizon.

Following the retaking of Camulodunum, the Romans rebuilt, raising a great wall around the entire city, a wall which still stands, and it remained the capital of Britain until the year 100, soon before they were forced to return to Italy.

A few hundred years passed by, until the Anglo-Saxons decided it was their turn to have a go at Britain. The Kingdom of Essex came into being, and Christianity came soon after, brought by St. Cedd, who built Essex's first church – The Chapel of St-Peter-on-the-wall. They never really left like the Romans, they just shagged their way into the culture. But, they gave us many things – fine jewellery, the basis of the legal system, the foundation of our language, and epic poetry. So, we all got along relatively well, fighting off the Vikings many a time, and everything was fine for another few hundred years, until it all went downhill again.

Britain's last invasion, 1066, you'll remember it from Year 7. The Normans arrived, and scattered the country with castles to defend against future invasion. Colchester was the site of one of these castles, built atop the ruins of the Temple of Claudius from nearly 900 years prior.

After a few hundred years of Norman control, the unpopular Poll Tax of 1381 caused rumblings of rebellion once again. The Peasants' Revolt of that same year began in Brentwood, Essex. Thousands of peasants from around the country joined with the Essex peasants, sacking London, until the riots were eventually dissipated by the 15-year-old King Richard II.

A quietness fell on Essex again for a few hundred years. The area grew prosperous from wool-making, as well as friendly trade with the Dutch. In the 16th Century, Dutch and Flemish immigrants arrived, bringing great drainage systems, clearing marshes and expand Essex's land.

But, we got bored, and another war was the only remedy. This time, the enemy was ourselves, with the start of the English Civil War. Colchester was the site of one of the main battles of the war. Royalists hid inside of the old Roman Wall, whilst the Parliamentarians laid siege from outside – shooting cannonballs from the hill I live on today, as well as catapulting dead animals and bodies to spread disease. The Royalist forces fell after 11 weeks, and King Charles I was executed soon after. Following the Siege, Colchester was the home for a military garrison, and continues to be a garrison town to this day.

For the next four centuries, Essex remained at peace, but industrialisation steadily divided the county. By the early 1900s, many in London and Essex had grown weary of factory life and expensive urban lodgings. At that time, around 90% of Britons rented their homes, and people were getting sick of it.

Sensing opportunity - and inspired by socialist ideals - landowners like F. F. Razmus and George Lansbury began selling off small parcels of Essex land to working families from across the country. And the people came. Essex was an aspirational place, sold to Londoners of the time rather like the American West was in the prior century – a land of open space and opportunity. As Magnus C. Granath argued in *Searching for the Promised Land: Basildon and the Pursuit of Happiness*, "the modern character of the southern half of Essex was moulded by the aspirational migration in the first half of the last century from some of the most deprived parts of London … they now owned their own little share of the riches of the earth: a small piece of England." Most bought less than an acre, building their own modest homes in the countryside. These early colonies

have since disappeared, absorbed into larger towns like Laindon in Basildon and Boxted in Greater Colchester.

Many migrants came from London's East End, bringing their Cockney culture and accent with them. Weekend trips to Clacton, Southend, and other seaside escapes had already made Essex familiar territory, but the dream of fresh air and open space drew them to stay for good. From these 19th-century Cockneys, much of modern Essex culture and language descends - rooted in resilience, reinvention, and the pursuit of something better.

After the Second World War, areas of Essex like West Ham, Barking, Ilford and Romford were swallowed up by the spreading monster known as Greater London. Essex became the 'dustbin of London', as it became essentially a satellite area of London, piping in thousands of workers each day – those too poor for London house prices.

Then came the last great change in the history of Essex – the death of Essex's manufacturing industry. Shipbuilding and factory work was undercut by foreign labour, and a shift to a services economy was needed. The Essex people wanted change, and they were ambitious people. When Margaret Thatcher promised this change, the Essex people believed it. The image of Essex people as chancers, as greedy, as gauche, emerged from this period, as Essex transformed from an industrial economy to a services economy.

There aren't many factories or shipyards anymore. Instead, there are towns which pump in thousands to the capital every day– insurers, executives, bankers, lawyers, traders – trains filled with white collar workers. A lot of people got very rich, and more and more people came to Essex as the London housing market went bonkers.

Now, we arrive at today – the modern Essex – a graveyard of English past, and a terrarium of modern times, all built on top of each other. Sarah Perry, Chancellor of the University of Essex and bestselling author of *The Essex Serpent*, described Essex as "a microcosm of the British consciousness", with many inhabitants being "very proud of coming from somewhere that is considered to be unliterary, unbeautiful, unartistic, and forcing forward a confrontation with the literary, the beautiful, the ancient, the myth".

And from where I sit now, watching drunkards blast music in Norman ruins, sitting on Georgian graves, next to a Roman wall, I'd have to agree with her. This is one of the things, I believe, that gives Essex it's unique character. It's all jumbled up – the ancient and the modern, the classical and the gauche, the vulgar and the beautiful.

Where else in the world will you see drug deals and through-the-pants-hand-jobs going on in the shadow of a Norman castle? Where else do the drunks sit on top of Roman walls? Where else do the gangs of Nike-emblazoned teenagers chat shit infront of an Anglo-Saxon church? That's the modern Essex: the beautifully ancient, the quaint countryside, the average middle-class families, and the stereotypical orange women and drunks, all stuck into one pressure cooker and yet somehow co-existing.

References:

1. *Granath, M. C. - Searching for the Promised Land: Basildon and the Pursuit of Happiness* (2004). Bexleyheath: Gold Star Books
2. *Srah Perry interviewed by Burrows, T – The Invention of Essex* (2023) London: Profile Books Ltd